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ABSTRACT

A common aim of teacher education is to have prospective teachers inquire about their teaching. In that regard, there has been concern about the effects of contexts within which such inquiry takes place. Recent deliberation and research about context has tended to focus on the structure and content of teacher education courses, the environmental nature of student teaching sites, or relationships in the student teaching triad. The paper attempts to clarify what contexts we might consider when talking about prospective teachers, and what questions we might raise about the relation of inquiry and context. The purpose of the discussion is to highlight how one's interpretations and re-interpretations of experience should be examined as contexts of inquiry. (Author)

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PROSPECTIVE TEACHERS AND THE EXPERIENTIAL CONTEXT OF INQUIRY

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Abstract

A common aim of teacher education is to have prospective teachers inquire about their teaching. In that regard, there has been concern about the effects of the contexts within which such inquiry takes place. Recent deliberation and research about context has tended to focus on the structure and content of teacher education courses, the environmental nature of student teaching sites, or relationships in the student teaching triad. This paper attempts to clarify what contexts we might consider when talking about prospective teachers, and what questions we might raise about the relation of inquiry and context. The purpose of the discussion is to highlight how one's interpretations and re-interpretations of experience should be examined as contexts of inquiry. In summary I will explore the implications of my remarks for our efforts to facilitate inquiry with prospective teachers.

Introduction

A common aim of teacher education is to have prospective teachers inquire about their teaching. In that regard, there has been concern about the effects of the contexts within which such inquiry takes place. Recent deliberation and research about context has tended to focus on the structure and content of teacher education courses, the environmental nature of student teaching sites, or relationships in the student teaching triad. This paper attempts to clarify what contexts we might consider when talking about prospective teachers, and what questions we might raise about the relation of inquiry and context. The purpose of the discussion is to highlight how one's interpretations and re-interpretations of experience should be examined as contexts of inquiry. In summary I will explore the implications of my remarks for our efforts to facilitate inquiry with prospective teachers.

The meaning of context

"Context" comes from the Latin "contexere": "to weave together into a whole." It is "the parts of a discourse that surround a word or passage and can throw light on its meaning" (Webster's Ninth Collegiate Dictionary, 1984, p. 283). If we conceive of social interaction as discourse, our acts and thoughts are "word" or "passage" surrounded by those aspects of the discourse which "throw light" on its meaning, giving it a context.

"Context" has a further definition: "the interrelated conditions in which something exists or occurs" (Webster's Ninth Dictionary, 1984, p. 283). These conditions relate to the nature of the setting and of our interactions with objects and with others. In order to understand a prospective teacher's actions, then, we need to analyze:

- the physical setting, and the nature of the objects which are manipulated (the physical context);

- the social and institutional constraints on one's actions (the social institutional context);

- the interpretations of prior experience they bring to bear on the present, and what form the interpretations take (the experiential context);

- the nature of interactions between self and environment (the ecological context).

Contexts necessarily limit and shape our actions. The contexts weave together several strands: the natural and the cultural (physical and experiential contexts), and the intrapsychological and the interpsychological (experiential and ecological contexts). Though we cannot fully comprehend the meaning of another's actions, we can usefully examine the threads, the contexts, which constitute the meaning of action. There has been some fine recent thinking and research about physical and social institutional contexts of student teaching (a partial list includes Griffin, 1983; Joyce & Clift, 1984; Zeichner, 1984; Zeichner & Grant, 1981; Zeichner & Tabachnick, 1985). In conjunction with these studies, I believe we need to consider the students' interpretations of their experiences, and how experience relates to the actions of inquiry.

Experiential context: Student interpretations of college work and the place of inquiry

Many teacher educators would agree with Ross's comment that we need to "conduct intensive study of student perspectives or read such studies" (Ross, 1987, p. 16). While ideologies or attitudes may not be tied to a certain context, perspectives are context-specific and concretely related to everyday actions, such as teaching practices (Zeichner, 1984). The search for perspectives or for interpretations of experience represents a search for the meanings which people attach to their interactions. As Popkewitz, Tabachnick & Zeichner (1979) state it:

"research is needed which examines the meanings of university student life in order to understand more fully student teacher life in the schools" (p. 58).

Interpretations of prior experiences appear to be powerful. Many researchers find that student teaching does not significantly alter, and may simply confirm, entering perspectives of teaching and of education (Bolin, 1988; Cole, 1986; Goodman, 1988; Mardle & Walker, 1980; Petty & Hogben, 1980; Power, 1981; Tabachnick & Zeichner, 1984). If there is truth in this notion, it is crucial that we ascertain how prospective teachers interpret prior experiences, as we create and improve programs designed to foster inquiry. In particular, I want to discuss some ideas about how prospective teachers' interpretations of college experience relate to inquiry. Students' ways of interpreting college work may signal how they perceive the task of inquiring about what they do. In turn, their experience (or inexperience) with forms of inquiry can affect how they interpret college and student teaching experiences.

INTERPRETATIONS OF COLLEGE WORK

There is some evidence that students hold to an instrumental, external orientation toward college work. Becker (1968) finds that students have a general goal of maturing and becoming an adult, while they hold to a "GPA perspective" regarding academic work. Their strategies in college are geared toward choosing courses and methods of study that ensure reasonable academic success, as measured almost solely by grades. When intellectual and other interests conflict with this goal, those interests tend to get suppressed.

Becker's study did not seem to account for differentiated academic perspectives and strategies, a gap that Holland & Eisenhart (1988) filled admirably. They studied female college students' cultural models, which are their systems of shared knowledge that may be discerned from

language and behavior. Holland & Eisenhart found three models: "work in exchange for doing well," "work in exchange for finishing college," and "work in exchange for learning from experts." The findings represent a refinement of Becker's earlier research. The argument is that there is not a single model or perspective, such as the "GPA perspective." Rather, grades and courses are interpreted through the lens of a certain model of schoolwork.

Female students who "work for doing well" expect that they will "make" good grades because of natural ability. The increased difficulty of making good grades in college causes them to question their ability.

"Work for finishing college" focuses on getting it over, grabbing the diploma. Tasks are perceived as arbitrary and schooling is simply an investment. Students "get" grades, not "make" grades. Self-inquiry in this case does not center on one's academic abilities, as defined by grades or professors, but on non-school abilities in the social and working world.

Students who "work for learning from experts" see grades as a sign of learning what they are supposed to learn. You "earn" grades. Self-inquiry is concerned with how well one has mastered the material.

After a time, academic work became marginal for most of the students: "six of the eight have de-emphasized 'academic' pursuits as a crucial part of their own self-meaning. Performance in school has become more instrumental - more a means to an end and usually an end that has to do with making money - and less expressive of themselves as individuals" (Holland & Eisenhart, 1988, p. 291).

Popkewitz and Wehlage (1977) also highlight this alienation from work in a study of Teacher Corps interns. The authors quote Cusick (1973) and Jackson (1968) concerning the passivity and inactivity of secondary student life, where "talk about academic work was nonexistent" (Popkewitz & Wehlage, p. 76). Perhaps these prior passive experiences are

carried over into college contexts, which would make it easier to legitimate a narrow perception of knowledge and learning when working in the circumscribed environment of student teaching. "University course work provides justification for the standardization and fragmentation of intern activities" (Popkewitz & Wehlage, p. 81).

Koskela (1985) took a different tack than the above studies. She compared student teachers' positive and negative orientations toward past academic experiences. "Student teachers with a more positive orientation toward their past seemed able to critique or affirm their present experience without the general sense that they had to be correcting their past." Others saw themselves as "setting the past right or avoiding the mistakes to which they had been subjected as students" (p. 521). The student teachers believed that critical thinking was the goal of their college teacher preparation program, and they were positive about teachers who encouraged thinking and questioning, but they felt that the goal was not implemented consistently. They were willing to be critical about specific issues that focused directly on their classroom experiences. So the student teachers directly linked the possibilities of inquiry with a particular physical and ecological context. Inquiry about their teaching was rooted in classrooms, but a broader focus of inquiry was not ruled out by some student teachers. Those with "rich histories of academic success" had fewer concerns over achievement and competence and were more ready to consider "broader societal issues related to schooling" (p. 551), which make up the social institutional context. Koskela would not argue that interpretation of academic success is the only factor that influences whether students are amenable to inquiry. One's conceptual capabilities, levels of reflective judgment, and attitudes are also strong forces in interpreting experiences and acting (Ross, 1987).

Neither Becker nor Holland and Eisenhart's studies was concerned

specifically with education students, and the studies mentioned take diverse paths. Still, their findings display the interconnection between students' interpretations of the college experience and the manner in which they inquire about their actions.

Researchers have taken many other approaches to studying the experiential context that could aid our understanding of inquiry. There have been calls to study students' dispositions toward inquiry (Feiman-Nemser & Buchmann, 1983), their intentions (Popkewitz & Wehlage, 1977; Shavelson & Stern, 1979), their receptivity to teacher education (Veenman, 1983), their cognitive and affective perspectives (Sitter, 1981), their cognitive schema (Koehler, 1985), their "guiding images" of themselves as teachers (Goodman, 1988), and how their experiential interpretations shape their process of self-analysis (Koskela, 1985). Clark (1988) offers a concise and articulate summary of efforts to unearth teachers' "implicit theories" and "preconceptions." Researchers have tried to conceptualize the "latent culture" (Lacey, 1977; Lortie, 1975), the "latent philosophy of education" (Bolin, 1988), or the "appreciation system" of attitudes, expectations and images (Schon, 1987) which prospective teachers bring to the student teaching experience.

It is difficult to describe and to synthesize the ever-emerging set of concepts related to experiential interpretations. Perhaps that is because most studies have separated cognition from action, and have not exposed the contexts of action. The concepts of "dispositions," "intentions," and the like are only meaningful in relation to the actions which precede, accompany, or follow them.

The ecological contexts: The nature and forms of <u>inquiry as action</u> for prospective teachers

Goal-directed action sequences which encompass thought and speech

should be the unit of analysis for studying the growth of complex human processes such as inquiry (Vygotsky, 1987). While "behavior" refers to movement and does not deal with mental processes, "action" is goal-directed activity which presupposes some sort of mental mediation within the process. Inquiry includes thinking about something one perceives or has perceived. Inquiry poses a question which necessarily has more than one possible response, or else the question would not need to be asked. The responses of inquiry are problematic. It is the whole of this process that one must study if the intent is to learn about the nature of inquiry.

Inquiry as action involves interpretations of ongoing experience (interpretive inquiry) and re-interpretations of past experiences, apart from the original contexts (re-interpretive inquiry). The experiential context is vital here, as it affects the content and means of our perceptions, the questions we ask, and our responses to the situation. The value of our inquiry depends upon how we have interpreted and re-interpreted experience. Let me examine each of these forms of inquiry.

INTERPRETIVE INQUIRY

Dewey states that in inquiring we begin with a "disturbance" or doubt (Dewey, 1933). But perception precedes disturbance; we perceive something which we interpret as the disturbance of a routine or intention. Teaching is predicated on responses to novel situations. Routines of action can be planned and initiated, but the outcomes of action are socially created within the nexus of physical, social institutional, and ecological contexts of classrooms. Students respond to classroom events in ways that cannot be accurately predicted. The ecological context of classrooms has been described as "complex, uncertain, and peppered with dilemmas" (Clark, 1988). Clearly the ecological context assures that action outcomes are interactive probabilities. We can study the outcomes in isolation, but

it is far more valuable to uncover the developmental processes of inquiry by asking questions about the content and means of inquiry:

While teaching, at what points did we perceive something that we interpreted as a "disturbance" of our routines or intentions? What questions, vocalized or not, did we ask about the event? How did we then respond? Or did we respond and then question the preceding perception? In what ways did we enlist prior experiences in this process of interpretive inquiry? After the events, how did we re-interpret our experiences?

Let us imagine that we are teaching. We perceive a student who is asleep in our class. We can interpret that perception as disturbing, based on our experiential context. Perhaps we believe that students should not sleep during class. That interpretation gives rise to many possible questions: Why is she sleeping? Is the class boring? What should I do? The questions need not be vocalized; they may exist as "inner speech." We then respond in some manner: by moving toward the student, by speaking to them, or by averting our gaze and ignoring the event. Interpretive inquiry may be conceived of as "thinking on our feet," as a sequence of mentally-mediated actions.

RE-INTERPRETIVE INQUIRY

Dewey also says that we move from an initial state of doubt to a state of resolution when inquiring. We do so by marshalling evidence to make judgments, a process which constitutes analysis. We select facts, choose guiding principles, and make decisions about our observations, in order to clear up "confused data" (Dewey, 1933, pp. 122-126). This form of inquiry, then, is a process of somewhat formal and systematic observation, analysis, and interpretation.

When we inquire about our part in a <u>past</u> event we re-interpret the event, which is to say we re-create its meaning (Van Manen, 1977). This is

analogous to "reflective inquiry." Garman (1986) stresses the active nature of inquiry, and the importance of the actor's interpretations of events:

> Inquiry knowledge is the continual rendering of our conscious experiences into forms for past and present understandings and future use. It is self-understanding for the professional community we all share. For the adult inquirer a certain process has to be set in motion, a process that involves reliving vicariously what once was originally lived through. It is this uncovering of taken-for-granted thought and action that amounts to a form of demythologizing (Garman, 1986, pp. 11-12).

For Zeichner, "the process of inquiry requires that prospective teachers render as problematic that which is frequently taken for granted about the role of teacher, the tasks of teaching and schooling in general" (Zeichner, 1983, p. 6). He speaks here of re-interpretive inquiry, with a focus on social institutional context. Many current teacher educators believe that prospective teachers ought to be able to engage in this form of demythologizing, to examine their own beliefs and actions in some systematic manner (Bolin, 1988; Elliott, 1976; Garman, 1986; Goodman, 1988; Korthagen, 1985; Koskela, 1985; Richardson-Koehler, 1988; Ross, 1987; Ross & Hannay, 1986; Rust, 1988; Salzillo & Van Fleet, 1977; Tom, 1985; Wehlage, 1981; Zeichner, 1981). The sense of freedom that can arise from this sort of fundamental questioning does not come easily. Before we begin the process we have to be willing to doubt our actions, which may lead to the dilemma Corcoran (1981) describes: "to admit to not knowing is to risk vulnerability; to pretend to know is to risk error" (p. 20). When teaching prospective teachers, we must be aware that most of them have not formally taught, and that they are unfamiliar with our concepts of inquiry. Discussing inquiry in college classes can convey only a shadow of the difficulty of questioning one's actions and beliefs, in any context.

CONCEPTUAL DIFFICULTIES

Inquiry represents a complex concept. We all must ask questions predicated on our language and conceptual systems, which form our lexicon of experience. Prospective teachers need a language system, a symbolic code, that allows them to expand their lexicon and make complex interpretations of their experiences, particularly classroom and work interactions. They need a vocabulary of inquiry.

> "Existential choice is thus expanded in proportion to the complexity of the symbolic code the individual acquires... Put another way, what cannot be imagined cannot be chosen by the individual." Without shared knowledge of how best to inquire about our actions and their consequences, our choices will be "restricted to the givens of the existing social order" (Bowers, 1984, p. 47).

Inquiry can be defined as a "formal way to generate knowledge" (Garman, 1986), and as a rational means of "considering appropriate action based on one's beliefs about the purposes of education and the potential and actual consequences of action" (Ross, 1987, p. 2). But we need to be cognizant of its conceptual difficulties. To make this point I'll employ the idea of "experience-near" and "experience-distant" concepts, which Geertz (1983) borrowed from Heinz Kohut.

> An experience-near concept is, roughly, one that someone - a patient, a subject, in our case an informant - might himself naturally and effortlessly use to define what he or his fellows see, hear, think, and so on, and which he would readily understand when similarly applied by others. An experience-distant concept is one that specialists of one sort or another... employ to forward their scientific, philosophical, or practical aims. "Love" is an experience-near concept, "object-cathexis" is an experience-distant one (p. 57).

I would argue that as teacher educators we are trying to forward our scientific, philosophical or practical (not to mention political) aims when we require prospective teachers to inquire. In school language, "reflective inquiry" is experience-distant, while "assessing the situation,"

"evaluating," "considering how it went," and similar snippets of language are experience-near. Geertz (1983) emphasizes that the concepts are not exclusive, nor is one superior. It is when we ignore one kind of concept that the trouble starts:

> Confinement to experience-near concepts leaves an ethnographer awash in immediacies, as well as entangled in vernacular. Confinement to experience-distant ones leaves him stranded in abstractions and smothered in jargon (Ibid., p. 57).

If we ask students to consider only their interpretations of experience when they inquire, this exemplifies a focus on experience-near concepts. It is experience perceived only in experiential context. (See Buchmann & Schwille, 1984, on the limitations of experience conceived in this way.) If on the other hand we ask students to inquire, we teach a process of inquiry, and we don't consider the students' interpretations of experience and of inquiry, this connotes a reliance on experience-distant concepts. It is experience taken out of experiential context. We would then be trying to remake prospective teachers in our image, instead of initially seeking out their images and perspectives (Ross, 1987).

This issue surfaces again when teacher educators ask student teachers to inquire about their teaching in the field. It may be discussed as "inside" versus "outside" points of view. Elliott (1984) points out that knowledge of social action, such as teaching, is not private property which is inadmissable and incomprehensible to outsiders. There are qualitative differences in understanding by insiders and outsiders, who have not participated in the actual events. But we can share some understanding. The test that an outsider's understanding fairly represents the insider's actions is whether the insider sees that understanding as an accurate interpretation. This requires personal dialogue and negotiation, with the outsider "feeding back to the insider their public translation of private knowledge" (p. 23). Before we get students to bring their acting and

thinking patterns into question we need to have a clearer notion of what those patterns look like, as articulated from "inside" and translated from "outside."

Conclusions

EXPERIENTIAL CONTEXT

Initially, it is imperative that teacher educators learn how prospective teachers interpret their prior college and role-taking experiences, and how they relate those experiences to the job of teaching. I agree with Ross (1987) that we need to develop understandings of prospective teachers' reflective capabilities: the ability to view teaching as problematic, the ability to rationally approach a problem, the ability to analyze problems in terms of significant issues, the ability to make intuitive judgments, and the capability to take action and then monitor its effects (p. 2).

Prospective teachers have ways of analyzing and interpreting their actions, developed over many years in various settings. We need to know more about their processes of "inquiry," as action. How, when, and why do they examine their thoughts and actions? To what extent do prospective teachers leave their observations and analyses of self and others open to doubt? What questions, if any, do they ask themselves? How do they respond to the doubts and questions asked: through internalized or inner speech, through vocal speech, through movement?

It is important to ascertain what action sequences prospective teachers utilize to make judgments about classroom interactions, before we try to engage them in inquiry. To do this, we must consider the discontinuities of experience.

EXPERIENTIAL DISCONTINUITIES

The interconnection of experience and inquiry can be seen in the

metaphors by which student teachers and experienced teachers analyze the classroom. The functional metaphor during student teaching is "trial and error." Prospective teachers' experience as observers of teachers has not prepared them to trust a "natural feel," to read the classroom barometer as experienced teachers can. As college students, their concerns have been to pass the test, to finish the paper. Standards have been set by others; evaluation has been primarily formal and summative. It should be no surprise then, with little if any practice or modeling of an inquiry process in their histories, that prospective teachers tend at first to be troubled by questions about how they examine their teaching. "Trial and error" in this new context signifies that they have no relevant process of inquiry to call forth.

It may be, as Richardson-Koehler (1988) has stated, that experienced cooperating teachers also function through trial and error. But while they may demonstrate no systematic approach, their experience functions as a kind of atmospheric device, so that they can compare this class with previous ones on some implicit but empirical scale. Their experiential context enables them to act with more assurance.

We all speak a "language of practice" (Yinger, 1987), which expresses the meanings we make of experiences. It is only through knowing how someone perceives, interprets, questions, and responds to events that we can know best how to engage them in new forms of inquiry, because the person will tend to interpret present events in light of past patterns of interpretation (Biott, 1983; Bolin, 1988; Popkewitz, Tabachnik & Zeichner, 1979).

But the questioning should take place gradually, because it represents an individual interpretation of a social system of investigating actions and coding thoughts.

> "We have inherited a particular way of conceiving and of evaluating things... The process of questioning takes place bit by bit, and requires prior initiation into the publicly developed and structured world which is being questioned... It is most important to determine at what level this questioning and this restructuring of reality is logically possible" (Pring, 1974, pp. 26-27).

Students could begin inquiring from an experience-near perspective and move toward experience-distant. They would examine and discuss their current interpretations of what has been by reconstructing their past, in order that they may develop a better way to construct what might be. Rommetveit (1974) proposes that inquiry utilize "prolepsis," "a communication process whereby individuals must identify others' implicit assumptions in order to interpret their utterances." As Dewey (1933) puts it: "Indeed, the business of education might be defined as an emancipation and enlargement of experience" (p. 202). Teacher education represents an opportunity for prospective teachers to reinterpret their experiences and, in dialogue with others, examine the moral dimensions of teaching and schooling (Beyer & Zeichner, 1987; Liston & Zeichner, 1987; Tom, 1985).

ECOLOGICAL DISCONTINUITIES

Inquiry is a long-term, complex process that requires practice in different contexts. Doyle (1977) studied the environmental and task characteristics that affect one's actions. He dealt with student teachers because "beginners often behave in ways that are incongruent with the environment" (p. 51). The research indicated that classrooms were for student teachers "multi-dimensional, simultaneous, and unpredictable." In contrast, college courses from the student's perspective are usually unidimensional (fairly homogeneous groupings and a strong emphasis on content), non-simultaneous (one central event occuring), and thus quite predictable. Given this background, prospective teachers would seem likely to experience a contextual discontinuity when they begin student teaching or extended field experiences. The skills which may have served

them well in college - passivity, reliance on external standards, a desire to get right answers - may not fit with their student teaching classrooms, particularly when teacher educators require that they inquire into their teaching performance. If inquiry has not been modeled, discussed, and practiced within the college environment, and the student teachers are feeling disoriented in a new environment, there is no reason to believe they will latch on to inquiry as helpful for them.

Teacher educators need to establish routines of inquiry (Floden & Clark, 1988), which can help alleviate the contextual discontinuities inherent in student teaching and the possible negative effects of doubt and uncertainty that inhere to the inquiry process. During education courses, re-interpretive inquiry would entail questioning prior educational experiences, experiences with children, experiences in work settings, experiences as teachers or adults in different settings; in sum, the experiential contexts that may relate to the work of teaching and learning in schools. Interpretive inquiry would mean questioning the course itself, as it unfolds.

The success of such inquiry depends on a supportive environment (see Elliott, 1985, for a full discussion) and upon a shared understanding of the meaning of inquiry. The function of inquiry needs to be examined across contexts and time. How do we learn to inquire in different ways, utilizing different levels of inquiry or reflection (Van Manen, 1977), depending on the activity in which we are engaged? How do we figure out what sort of inquiry is most appropriate, and at what time?

COMING TO GRIPS WITH INQUIRY

As teacher educators, we want to help prospective teachers learn to inquire about their actions. We want them to have the power to articulately describe the meaning of "what was," "what is," and then to define "what ought to be." We must at the same time recognize the

boundaries and shadings of the contexts surrounding acts of inquiry.

Geertz (1984) talks about the endeavor of coming to grips with key concepts such as "inquiry." We can cut the concept down to size by thinking about the difficulties of understanding and applying and teaching inquiry. In this attempt we are really "trying to ensure its continued importance" (p. 4). The more clearly we consider the impacts of context - the physical setting, the social institutional structures, one's interpretations of experience, and the interrelationships of self and environment - the more light we will throw on our efforts to educate teachers.

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